

Review: The Sociologist's Hand

Author(s): Kai Erikson

Review by: Kai Erikson

Source: *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (Nov., 1986), pp. 808-811

Published by: American Sociological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2071103>

Accessed: 24-06-2016 10:47 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Sage Publications, Inc., American Sociological Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Contemporary Sociology*

The Sociologist's Hand

Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article, by HOWARD S. BECKER (with a chapter by Pamela Richards). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. 174 pp. \$20.00 cloth. \$6.95 paper.

KAI ERIKSON
Yale University

It is widely thought both inside and outside the academy that sociologists do not express themselves very gracefully. The editor of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, in an entry on "sociologese," believes he knows why:

Sociology is a new science concerning itself not with esoteric matters outside the comprehension of the layman, as the older sciences do, but with the ordinary affairs of ordinary people. This seems to engender in those who write about it a feeling that the lack of any abstruseness in their subject demands a compensatory abstruseness in their language. . . . There are of course writers on sociological subjects who express themselves clearly and simply; that makes it the more deplorable that such books are often written in a jargon which one is almost tempted to believe is deliberately employed for the purpose of making what is simple appear complicated, exhibiting in an extreme form the common vice . . . of preferring pretentious abstract words to complex concrete ones [569-70].

There is a certain justice in that view, of course, but its main argument is both irritating and wrong. Most of our critics come from fields where things do not need to be stated very exactly and where there is little need for special vocabularies or special ways of presenting information. Sociologists, though, occupy something of a border territory, positioned between the holdings of historians and literary critics, say, who often use language to reach out to larger audiences, and the holdings of economists and statisticians who spend a good deal of time circulating material to one another written in a kind of code. To the first set of neighbors we look inelegant; to the second we look inexact.

George Orwell once translated a familiar passage from Ecclesiastes into what he took to be a sample of sociologese. The original reads:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong,

neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

And Orwell's parody reads:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account [153].

Now Orwell wants us to note that the language of the first passage is incomparably richer than the language of the second, and who would disagree with that? The one is wondrous poetry, the other as labored and dreary as the cunning of a fine writer could make it. But there is another moral here as well, one that Orwell did not intend. The poetry is enchanting. It almost seems to bathe one in its warmth. But it does not ask to be read critically, which the parody, for all its painful awkwardness, does. And that really matters, too; for once readers are invited to listen to the thought rather than the language, the logic rather than the mood, they may more easily notice that the passage is full of very doubtful sociology. For the race almost always *does* go to the swift, the battle to the strong, the advantage to people of knowledge and skill; and while time and chance may now and then supply an exception to that rule, few sensible persons would try to live by so contingent a philosophy—and none would make it the basis of a defense system or an investment portfolio.

H. L. Mencken made much the same point in an essay on Abraham Lincoln:

The Gettysburg speech is at once the shortest and the most famous oration in American history. . . . Nothing else precisely like it is to be found in the whole range of oratory. Lincoln himself never even remotely approached it. It is genuinely stupendous.

But let us not forget that it is poetry, not logic; beauty, not sense. Think of the argument in it. Put it in the cold words of everyday. The doctrine is simply this: that the Union soldiers who died at Gettysburg sacrificed their lives to the cause of self-determination—"that government of the people, by the people, for the people," should not perish from the earth. It is difficult to imagine anything more untrue. The Union soldiers in that battle actually fought self-determination; it was the Confederates who fought for the right of the people to govern themselves. . . . [79-80].

Mencken carries the argument further, but we need not follow him. The point is that hundreds of millions of Americans have read the Gettysburg Address and tens of millions have memorized all or parts of it, but it is a fair guess that only a few have ever had occasion to "think of the argument in it."

So the challenge for sociological writing is to convey ideas and information with enough clarity to be understood outside the narrow precincts of the discipline and yet with enough precision to allow for careful inspection and evaluation within it. We would be quite right, then, to dismiss the rebukes of critics like Fowler and Orwell out of hand: they have no idea what sociology is. But in the quiet of our own counsels we can admit that most of us do not write well, or at least not as well as we think we should. Why?

That is the question Howard S. Becker addresses in this wonderful book. It is easy to find adjectives for the piece—humane, wry, reflective, gentle, wise. To begin that way, however, violates one of the first rules of good composition. "Write with nouns and verbs," Strunk and White insist (1979: 71), "not with adjectives and adverbs." Yet nouns are more difficult to come by when dealing with Becker's book. What, for example, should we call it? It is a primer in the sense that it teaches the elements of good writing. It is a shrewd and subtle essay on the social organization of scholarship. It is a kind of intellectual memoir, too, not because Becker is impressed with his own literary skills but because writing is a lonely business at best, and those who try to discuss it aloud or in print soon find that most of their examples have to come from their own experience.

The apparent stimulus for this work was a writing seminar that Becker conducted for several years at Northwestern.* The students who shared that encounter supplied much of Becker's appreci-

ation for the problems of sociological writing—and one of them, Pamela Richards, supplied a compelling chapter on the risks of exposing one's ideas to the printed page. The temper of the seminar becomes the temper of the book: Becker is of course an outstanding scholar who attends carefully to his own work, but he also reads the words of others with a special generosity and respect—qualities reflected as clearly in these pages as they must have been in those classrooms.

Becker has a Puritan's regard for plain style. His sentences are spare and lean. He does not like the flourishes and grace notes that decorate the prose of so many of the rest of us. He does not use words, as poets do, to make music or create moods or paint scenes. He argues that "unnecessary words take up room and are thus uneconomic. They cheat, demanding attention by hinting at profundities and sophistication they don't contain." At the second meeting of his first seminar, for example, Becker passed around a few pages of work by one of his colleagues and then led the group in a strenuous round of hedge-clipping:

With my pencil poised over a word or clause, I asked, "Does this need to be here? If not, I'm taking it out." . . . At the end of three hours we had reduced the four pages to three-quarters of a page without losing any nuance or essential detail [5-6]

As a tutor, though, Becker may be more Quaker than Puritan. He tells us that the clean line, the clear argument—like grace itself—lies submerged somewhere in the anxious clutter of our minds. His remedy is for us to let all of it spill out onto the page in a frenzy of liberation: "write whatever comes into your head, as fast as you can type. . . . The object is to find out, by the time you get to the end of your draft, what you have in mind." And Becker follows that advice in his own work: "As I write, I begin to see the structure my prose is moving toward. 'Oh, that's what I want to say.' " That is a view of things that E. M. Forster understood well: "How can I tell what I think," he has a crisp old lady say, "till I see what I say?" (1927:152).

Well, that's too untidy a procedure for my temperament. I lean toward a Calvinist's counsel—to fashion as detailed an outline as one can in an effort to rein in all those swirling, fitful, undisciplined ideas. Yet I know Becker is right: for most people the problem is to get it out, to dredge up the dark chaos inside and to splash it across the surface of the page so that one can cut, slash, rearrange, try again. Is that writing or a step preliminary to it? That may not matter much, but I would argue—and Becker agrees, even if his

* The Yale Department of Sociology, too, has a writing seminar. Everyone in it helped shape the views reflected in this brief essay, and everyone joined in the editing process with a vigor that would have delighted Becker. I owe a special debt to Robert K. Merton as well.

emphasis is somewhat different—that you haven't begun the final process of composing until you have your thoughts organized and your arrangements framed, a service that only a careful outline can supply.

Becker proposes that most of us have become inhibited from expressing ourselves clearly by the "institutions of scholarly life," and that sounds exactly right to me. The habits of thinking and writing taught in most secondary schools, the confusions and uncertainties created by the hierarchies of the academy, the pretensions that serve as emblems of membership in the profession, the usages observed by most of our trade journals, the awe with which we learn to regard "the literature"—these are the main reasons, Becker says, why we stiffen before a typewriter or keyboard and work in a kind of furtive silence. So once the book has been read for what it has to say about the processes of writing it can be read once again for what it has to say about that institutional scaffolding and the way it constrains us. Becker's book, in fact, may actually help change the conventions of sociological reporting if the rest of us join in by keeping the subject alive and the pressure on. We could begin by encouraging our journals to permit—maybe even invite—the use of the first-person pronoun. What might flow from that?

The social organization of scholarly life is not the only problem intruding on sociological prose, however, and if Becker had asked *me* to contribute a chapter to his book I might have raised an additional point. Most of the students I have known seem to feel that whatever writing skills they bring to the profession start to erode the minute they enter it. The more sociological the cast of mind, apparently, the stiffer and more cramped the sociological hand. That clearly has something to do with the structural peculiarities of our craft, as Becker points out so thoughtfully, but it also has something to do with the intellectual peculiarities of the materials we are fated to work with.

One might note, for example, that we sociologists tend to distrust the individual case as being idiosyncratic and unrepresentative, and like to climb up onto the plane of generality as soon as (if not well before) the argument permits. Ours is a nomothetic discipline rather than an idiographic one, and that distinction says a good deal not only about the larger epistemological boundaries within which we work but also about the languages we are required to use for the purpose. Our pursuit of the general has meant that we have had to abandon almost completely the arts of biography and description, of coloring landscapes with words.

One might note, too, that sociologists are invited by the logic of their perspective to think in terms of lateral arrangements rather than sequential ones.

Our stock in trade has normally been the relationships between people and events and institutions that coexist in time; our scholarly task has been to trace collateral connections. This means that sociologists are rarely in a position to use a narrative line, to tell a story. And that's a real loss, because one of the surest ways to sort out one's thoughts and organize one's material is to arrange them in chronologies. Malcolm Cowley once complained that the sociologist

seldom uses transitive verbs of action, like "break," "injure," "help," and "adore." Instead he [sic] uses verbs of relation, verbs which imply that one set of nouns and adjectives, used as compound subject of sentence, is larger or smaller than, dominant over, subordinate to, causative of, or resultant from another series of nouns and adjectives [43].

Well, of course. What did he expect? Relations between things and changes in those relations are what we write about, and should our repertoire of verbs appear meager to someone who likes the sound of words like "adore," that is the product of our craft and not our prose style. (If Cowley's remark seems a bit soggy, incidentally, it is probably because I had to retrieve it from the ocean floor, where the article of which it was once a part—a vessel of tremendous tonnage but frail build—was sunk instantly a number of years ago by a single shot from Robert K. Merton [1972].)

There are many similar matters one might raise, but the chief point is that the languages of sociology tend toward the abstract because the perspectives of sociology tend toward the abstract. One of our tasks is to see if we can distinguish between those usages that are an inevitable result of the sociological way of looking at things and those usages that are really no more than lazy conventions that have drifted in among the other intellectual reflexes of the field. Our view of reality is a prospect unique to those who peer out at the world through special disciplinary lenses and the languages we use need to be able to capture that marvelous, peculiar vision.

Such considerations, however, would have been but a chapter folded into the back of an excellent book. So I will bring this review to a close by quoting what I thought were the best sentences in the work—not just because they contain such good advice but because they reflect so well Becker's approach to the problems of writing. "The main lesson is not the specifics of what I have said but the Zen lesson of *paying attention*. Writers need to pay close attention to what they have written as they revise, looking at every word as if they meant it to be taken seriously."

That's it exactly: Pause. Reflect. Take care. And pay attention. ●

Other Literature Cited

- Cowley, Malcolm. 1956. "Sociological Habit Patterns in Linguistic Transmogrification," *The Reporter*, Sept. 20, 15:41-43.
- Forster, E. M. 1927. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Fowler, H. W. 1965. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. ed. 2, rev. Sir Ernest Gowers. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mencken, H. L. 1955. (1920). "Abraham Lincoln." In

The Vintage Mencken, ed. Alistair Cooke. New York: Vintage.

- Merton, Robert K. 1972 (1969). "Sociology, Jargon, and Slangish." In *Sociology: Theories in Conflict*, ed. Serge Denisoff. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Orwell, George. 1946. "Politics and the English Language." In *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Strunk, William, Jr., and E. B. White. 1979 (1959). *The Elements of Style*. ed. 3. New York: Macmillan.

Towards a Sociology of Measurement

Notes on Social Measurement: Historical and Critical, by OTIS DUDLEY DUNCAN. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984. 256 pp. \$14.50 cloth.

ALBERT REISS, JR.
Yale University

The title for this little volume, *Notes on Social Measurement: Historical and Critical*, is unduly modest. I prefer to regard it as *Historical and Critical Discourses on Social Measurement*, for these are profound conversations about the history of social measurement and its current state in the social sciences, especially within sociology. It is a work of mature scholarship and genius that hopefully will do much to restore the sociology of knowledge to its rightful place and its proper course.

The course upon which Duncan would set us—the development of a sociology of measurement—is not an easy one, however. This book is intended primarily to instruct us about the necessity of embarking upon that course and the risks incurred in doing so. Make no mistake about it: the development of a sociology of measurement is not a simple task; it is a monumental enterprise. Those who have long regarded Duncan as among the most elegant of social scientists will be disappointed should they look to this volume for simple answers about measurement—the kind they are used to in conventional texts. He would have us put our ideas in order before we try the formidable task of measuring.

Before telling you a bit more of what this little book is about, I feel compelled to say that although it is a rich and rewarding experience, it is also intimidating. Not for the reason that readers of Duncan's work might expect—that it is beyond their simple grasp of mathematics or statistics. There are only a few such pages in the entire volume, for these are indeed conversations. Although Kenneth Boulding does not say it quite as bluntly, his admission on the dustjacket, "I think I have not read a book in a long time from which I have learned more," testifies to its originality and breadth of scholarship.

What emerges in this volume is the complete scholar—one familiar with the works of poets from classical antiquity to modern times, of historians and philosophers, as well as of mathematicians and scientists. What lies latent in this volume is that it might send us upon the proper course of a humanistic sociology. And, just as Duncan exhorts us to abandon many of our shibboleths (theories) and incantations (statisticism) in practicing research, so he would direct us to a painstaking process of uncovering the social roots of social measurement and a sociology of measurement to enlighten us about the role of quantification in society.

The volume is essentially made up of two parts and three theses. The first part is an historical examination of social measurement, and the second a critical examination of some issues in the development of measurement and of contemporary social measurement—its predicaments and practices. There are three theses: The first and fundamental one is that the roots of social measurement are to be found in the social process itself and not in the scientific method as developed in the seventeenth and later centuries. The second is a major corollary:

A sociology of measurement, allied with an expanded historical metrology, is needed not less for the improvement of measurement technique than for an understanding of the role of quantification in society [xii].

And the third sets our future course: the methods of the population sciences are the model for social measurement.

The social determinants of knowledge are the core of a sociology of knowledge. Duncan argues persuasively that many of the procedures used by natural and social scientists in measuring are social